

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles Police Department

Personal Experience

O. H. 518

KARL KISTLER

Interviewed

by

Stephen Papalas

on

February 24, 1983

## KARL S. KISTLER

Karl S. Kistler was born on July 17, 1921 to Samuel C. and Lula Mae Kistler. His first descendant in America was John George Kistler who came to the New World from Germany in 1737 and served in the French and Indian War. John Kistler had five sons and each of them fought in the American Revolution. A grandfather six generations back served as a Pennsylvania delegate and voted to seat Abraham Lincoln as President of the United States. A distant cousin co-founded the Pennsylvania free public school system and another cousin was mayor of Reading, Pennsylvania in the early 1800's. Two other cousins, the Wannamakers, served on the Ohio Supreme Court in the late 1800's and U. F. Kistler, also a cousin, was the city attorney for Youngstown, Ohio during the early 1900's.

During the 1920's, Karl Kistler's uncle, Harvey C. Kistler, served as mayor of Niles and was in that office during the Ku Klux Klan riot of 1924.

Karl Kistler, himself, attended Niles City Schools and graduated from Niles McKinley High School in 1939. He joined the United States Army and served in the Ordinance Corps in the Pacific Theater during World War II.

Upon receiving an honorable discharge from the service in 1946, he joined the Kistler Insurance Agency, which had been established by his uncle, former Niles mayor Harvey C. Kistler. Karl Kistler is currently the sole proprietor of the successful Kistler Insurance Agency. He and his wife,

the former Francis Turner, reside at 156 Sayers Avenue.

They have four daughters: Mae Beth 35, Joanne 34, Karline 31 and Rebecca 32.

An active member of the Niles Trinity Lutheran Church, Kistler has been formerly recognized for 25 years of service on the Cleveland Hospital Association of Northeastern Ohio. He is also a past president of the Niles Churches for Housing, which built the Central Park Apartments. He is currently a church elder and is a Mason. Kistler is active in the Niles Kiwanis Club, the Eastern Ohio Lung Association and is a past Commander of the American Legion. One of his hobbies is collecting antiques.

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INTERVIEWEE: KARL KISTLER

INTERVIEWER: Stephen G. Papalas

SUBJECT: Police officers, KKK, National Guard,  
Class of 1939

DATE: February 24, 1983

P: This is an interview with Karl Kistler for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program dealing with the Niles Police Department and his uncle, Mayor Harvey Kistler. The interview is given by Stephen G. Papalas at Mr. Kistler's office on Robbins Avenue on February 24, 1983. The time is 4:25 p.m.

Mr. Kistler, could you tell me how old you are?

K: I am 61 years old.

P: Where were you born at?

K: In Niles, Ohio on Victor Avenue.

P: Can you tell me a little bit about your family background? How long have your parents lived in Niles?

K: My parents moved to Niles in 1918. My father was born in Lordstown Township. He was one of ten children. He married my mother who was Lula Mae Bunker. She worked for years in Lordstown in the old Newmanburg Restaurant.

P: Did they go into the restaurant business or anything?

K: No. My father came to town and was originally in the livery stable business which was situated where the present Municipal Building is located.

P: Do you remember anything about that livery stable?

K: No, I was too young for that.

P: What are your earliest recollections of downtown Niles?

K: Downtown was a busy metropolis of that day and time. Saturday night it used to be a popular place for everyone to go downtown and you continually walked around the blocks and met people and friends that you knew and you would talk to them. Everyone would spend Saturday night there. The movies were popular in those days. There was the Butler, the old Stafford, and the Warner in the early days. The McKinley Theater was reopened again after the Depression.

P: What about your neighborhood? Did you live on Victor Street all of your young life?

K: I lived on Victor until 1929. I moved to Chestnut Street right behind the Edison Junior High School which was the high school in Niles at that time.

P: What was the neighborhood like? Was it close-knit?

K: We had a close-knit neighborhood. There were no parks at that time. The kids entertained themselves and played on the street. The kids used to be chased off of the street by the city police. The neighbors would complain about playing ball.

P: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

K: I had one brother.

P: His name?

K: Charles James Kistler.

P: Was he older than you?

K: He was six years older than me. He is now deceased.

P: I take it that you went to Niles High School?

K: Right.

P: That is where Edison School is now?

K: That is right.

P: What was it like? What were your courses like? Who were teachers? Does anything stand out in your mind?

K: We had the standard courses. We had shop in those days. We had a classical course. If you were going to college you could have it. A lot of the people in town

and the attorneys now like Attorney Westenfield and former Judge Paul Moritz was my teacher. I remember the kids walking in from McKinley Heights and all around. We didn't have school buses in those days. We would go home for lunch. We had an hour for lunch and came back. That is about it, I guess.

P: What did you do after high school?

K: After high school I worked the first summer on my parents' farm. I got a job in U. S. Steel in the 18" steel mill in McDonald. I worked there until I went in the service in 1942.

P: What year did you graduate from high school?

K: In 1939.

P: Was it a large class?

K: It was one of the largest classes they had up until that time.

P: Who were some of your best friends? Is there anyone who lives in Niles today that you might know?

K: I always said that Niles would fold up if it wasn't for the class of 1939. Mitch Shaker was our class president. Dr. Jimmy Williams was our vice-president. This may be reversed, but they were the head of the class. Barney and Gil McAuley were in our class. Dr. Altiero was a member of our class, Jim Longberry, Russ Berline, and there was a fellow by the name of Allen Pritchard. He is in Washington. He is associated with the Municipal League in the United States. We had several ministers and people that left in our class.

P: You went to the war in 1942?

K: Right.

P: Pacific Theater? You came back when?

K: December of 1945.

P: Was the town different? Did anything seem changed?

K: Not really during that four year period. The town didn't change much. The town really didn't begin to change until the late 1950's.

P: How did that change occur? In what way?

K: There were some underpasses that had just been built which opened up the city more or less. There began to be quite a bit of expansion. The shopping centers were just coming in. Shortly after that the McKinley Heights shopping center was built. There were quite a few buildings becoming vacant in the downtown area. I saw a lot of the local businessmen going out of business or passing away and their children not carrying on the business.

P: Going back a little bit further before the 1950's when you were younger, can you remember any of the early policemen?

K: There was what I remember in particular. It was Dickey Neiss. He was a fat, jolly, Irish policeman. I guess that is what you would call him. I can remember him chasing us kids. There was the first motorcycle cop in Niles. It was policeman by the name of Booth. I remember Charlie Nicholas the Chief of Police. I think my uncle appointed him chief when he was mayor and also fire chief Swager. I think he was appointed during my uncle's reign as mayor.

P: What sort of person was Chief Nicholas? Do you remember him?

K: I can remember as a boy he seemed to be old at that time to me. He was a good-looking, well-respected person. He lived in the neighboring block to me. I knew his son, but I didn't know him that well as far as running around with him.

P: Who was his son?

K: I am sure he had a son. We would have to check that. I am sure that he had one son.

P: Are there still any family members in Niles?

K: Not that I know of.

P: What else can you tell me about Nicholas? Was he tall?

K: Yes, he was tall. He appeared to be easygoing. Nick Warsaw was a policeman at that time. He had been on the force quite a bit. I can't remember the rest of their names.

Actually there wasn't too much doing for the poice department other than the prohibition days. They were in on that. The cars were just coming into their own actually back in those times. There were some arrests, but very little robberies. There used to be a cop by the name of Dutch Newhart who used to work the night shift. He used to check on the stores downtown. He was more or less paid by the

merchants. He circulated the downtown area at night. He checked the doors and lights and saw that everything was in shape.

P: What kind of person was he?

K: He was a cop, like in those days, that was friendly with the young people. You got to know him. You were afraid of them up until a certain age. Then you realized that they were your friends. You became good friends with them.

P: Who is the earliest mayor that you can remember?

K: My uncle, Harvey Kistler, would be the earliest. I would have been about two or three years old when he went into office.

P: I want to spend a lot of time on Kistler. Who do you remember afterwards? Who was probably the mayor that you would respect the most?

K: I don't know mayors that you would respect. I can remember when Elmer Fisher was mayor of the town. I remember Mayor Lennie who did quite a few good things for the city of Niles. I can remember the Crows and the Williams' that were in prior to that. I was too young to have any personal contact with them.

P: When you were younger, did you ever feel that there was a difference in the town in general and those people who lived on the east end? Were there any problems with the two groups before 1924?

K: I don't know of any problems because they were the ethnic groups that settled over there. Some of the founders had moved up into other areas. The ethnic groups moved in like the Italians and some of those people. We got along in school and everything. We had no problems.

P: I want to talk to you a little bit about your uncle now. Harvey Kistler became mayor in the early 1920's. I believe it was 1923 after defeating Charles Crow. At the time that he came in the Ku Klux Klan was very strong in the Mahoning Valley. Niles seemed to be about the last community in which it began to develop. There are various reasons for this. One is that when they did want to have a membership drive; Crow wouldn't let them come in if they were going to have their faces covered. After Harvey became mayor, they did march. He gave them the permit. I don't know if he later regretted it or not. Did he ever talk to you about that?

K: He never discussed the Klan or that too much with me. Of



course, I was quite young at that time. I can only remember it at the time of the parade and seeing them covered and some of the action and trouble. I can remember seeing the damage that they did to his house when they blew the front porch off. I remember seeing the National Guard who camped out at his place for several days.

P: Which group did blow up the mayor's house? Some people say it was the Klan and some people say it was the Catholics.

K: I really don't know. I was too young at that time. I believe the Catholic's group name was the Knights of the Flaming Arrow.

P: Circle.

K: Circle, yes. It was a time that Niles was basically a mill town. There were a lot of Welsh people and Protestants. At that time I would imagine that the Catholics were moving in with an increase. That was about the time that Mount Carmel was being built I suppose or shortly after that.

P: In later years, did he ever talk to you about the incident?

K: No, he never mentioned anything about the parade or the incidents. He was in politics and knew the governors and that. He would talk to me about Governor Donahay and some of the problems that he had getting the National Guard to come out.

P: What did he say about Donahay?

K: He thought that Donahay was a pretty square shooter. He came to his rescue and helped to restore order to the community.

P: He felt that Donahay was slow in responding with the Guard?

K: That was his idea of it.

P: What did he say about his years in office?

K: I can remember his comments on the years in office and some of the accomplishments. He was able to obtain options on the ground that the Meander Reservoir is now on for the city of Niles. He later joined up with Youngstown to form the Mahoning Sanitary District.

I can remember his comments that the Denu Municipal Building where the water and light offices are now was built quite a bit on the fines that he levied in his municipal court during his administration.

I think part of the groundwork for the viaduct over the Mahoning River was instigated during his term in office.

P: Some people feel that Kistler was unfair with the townspeople like the Catholics in the town. He favored the Klan a little too much. Would you agree to that?

K: I don't know that I could agree to that but I have heard a lot of people say that my uncle was strictly anti-Catholic. That was the way a lot of people were in those days. They were prejudice then just like some of us are today or some people are today on the colored people. There has been a mellowing of that over the period of years. He was well-respected by a lot of the Catholic people because I could tell by the clients that we have that never left him because of his feeling.

P: Do you think it would be possible that he was a member of the Klan?

K: I doubt that very much. He worked on the railroad during that period of time. I just think he was more or less a fair man and felt that they had as much right to their organization and to parade as any other group. He was a Mason in those days. They also had their own ceremonies. Possibly the Klan had a right to have their's.

P: The Knights of Columbus probably because they were around them. Weren't they?

K: Yes. They were another group. Over the period of years, that has mellowed. They couldn't belong to the Masonic Order and the Masons couldn't belong to them. I guess there are provisions now that they can belong.

P: When did Harvey come to Niles?

K: He was born in Lordstown and of course Niles was the closest city. I imagine that he came to Niles in 1910 or 1915. He settled and married a girl. He came here. He first moved in the house on West Park Avenue up near Waddell Park. Later he moved in about 1928 onto Sayers Avenue where he lived the rest of his life.

P: He worked on the railroad when he first came to Niles?

K: Right. He was a telegrapher and he ran the detour station on the Pennsylvania Railroad.

P: What made him decide to run for mayor? Did he ever say?

K: He never mentioned why he decided to. I think he probably, being in organizations and town, he was encouraged by his

friends and associates.

P: After he became mayor, what led him to select O. O. Hewitt as his service director? How did he know Hewitt?

K: I don't know. Mr. Hewitt was also a Mason at that time. He was a distant cousin on his mother's side to Harvey. I just think that they were friends and probably collaborated to help him become mayor. It was probably a campaign chairman or that.

P: The two were distant cousins?

K: Yes.

P: That is interesting. That is good.

K: I don't know if it started when he was mayor or not, but for years it was in Niles that you had a safety director that was Protestant and a service director that was Catholic or vice versa. They used to always work it out that way. Whether it was politics or not, that is the way it was for years.

P: Who was his safety director? Do you remember?

K: I don't know who his safety director was.

P: What kind of guy would you describe Kistler as being? How do you remember him?

K: Harvey was a good-hearted, public-minded person. He was basically from a German background. Having come to work for him, he believed in the old school of--I worked for mine and earned mine; nobody gave me anything. There were no gifts along the way. You worked, got paid and earned your way along in the way. He was very active in all of the civic things in town. He was one of the original men who got the YMCA organized in town. He was one of the founders of the Lutheran church in town. He was active in the Masonic Temple. He helped in the building of that. In later years, he was a member of all the civic groups in towns such as the Kiwanis. He belonged to the TB and Health Association. He was active in the Chamber of Commerce. He helped organize and get their first secretary here in town when it was active. He was chairman of the bond promotion to get the underpasses built and eliminated the railroad eliminations.

P: Did you ever have an experience with him that you could relate to me that would describe his personality?

K: Not really any experience. My parents and he and his wife were very close. We exchanged Christmases every year.

We had Christmas at ~~their~~ house one year. They would come to our house the next year. His wife had polio at an early age. For that reason she didn't feel that she could hold a baby and they never had any children.

He devoted his time to the city of Niles and civic endeavors. He was also a member of the group that tried to have a hospital built around Niles in 1948 and 1949. He was a good husband. My uncle, in later years, went into the construction business with Mr. Kline. E. F. Kline and he formed a construction business. They built the Lordstown School at that time. They built the building where Reisman's is located now. One of the buildings that they remodeled was the old Niles Hardware where Swartz's were in business on East Park Avenue.

P: What year did they involve themselves in construction?

K: It was in the Depression years.

P: After he left the mayor's office in about 1930 . . .

K: No, it was about 1926 or 1927 that he would have gone out.

P: What did he do for a living at that point?

K: He went back to railroad work. He shortly after that purchased the Taylor Insurance Agency in town. He would sell insurance until . . . He always worked the 3:00 to 11:00 shift on the railroad. He had time to run his office. His gal would run it from the time he went to work . . . Later on he purchased a Bremer Agency and also the Campbell Agency in about 1937.

P: The Bremer Agency?

K: Yes. I think one of his sons ran a tire manufacturing out in Tiffin, Ohio. There were several agencies that were bought up at that time to form the present Kistler Agency.

P: How old was Harvey when he became mayor?

K: He probably was right around thirty years of age I would say.

P: Thirty years old when he became mayor?

K: Yes.

P: That is pretty young.

K: Yes.

P: He had a very successful business after his terms in office?

K: Right.

P: In a community that experienced a problem with the Klan and many of the people, who were his clients were from the east end?

K: Yes, a lot of them. When I took over the business, I had a lot of the people who he had arrested during prohibition. They would tell me that he was fair when he was mayor. It didn't matter if you were from the east end or the upper-class on Robbins Avenue. If you were arrested for a violation, he would give you the same fine. There would be no difference.

P: That is alright. How many other mayors had a successful business after they left office?

K: I can remember not too many. Elmer Fisher, more or less, ran his grocery store for several years after that until he went to work for the county.

Mayor Lennie left the town and ran a business in Pennsylvania. Very few of them stayed in Niles and were a success.

P: What was Kistler's appearance? Was he a well-dressed man all of the time? Was he short? Did he walk with a shuffle? How would you describe him?

K: He was a fellow about six feet tall. He was heavy. He was probably around 200 pounds. For years he wore eyeglasses that pinched at the nose. He always wore a bow tie. All his life he wore a bow tie. We were in a serious accident in 1929 taking a payroll out to the construction site at the Lordstown School. The car was completely demolished and he received two broken legs. He had trouble with his legs after that. You could say that he more or less shuffled the one leg.

P: What did he do in his later years?

K: He was still active in the business at death. He just kept plugging away in business and trying to promote the city actually. That was the time around 1950. They were trying to put the hospital together. They established the Chamber of Commerce and they just hired their first secretary for the YMCA. He was active right up until the end of all of these civic organizations such as Kiwanis and so forth.

P: How old was he when he died?

K: He was going to be 65 I believe when he died.

P: What year was that?

K: 1950.

P: Did he ever say anything about the town that you remember? Is there anything that stands out in your mind, anything about the mayor's office?

K: He never said anything about the mayor's office. When I joined him it was some fifteen or eighteen years after he had been in office. There have been a lot of stories told about the town. You had to get to certain people if you wanted to get certain things done. If they were for it, you had no problem. If they were against it, you didn't get it done. There are stories told of a family in town that didn't want General Electric to expand; as a result of that they went to Cleveland and built Nela park. Stories were told of Republic wanting to increase their mills and that. A certain group of businessmen and people in town didn't want them to settle here. As a result, they didn't settle here.

P: It doesn't sound much different than today?

K: That is right. It has been a controlled town. I think today that we see the control shifting from more or less the old Protestant and the industrial families in town to the Italian and that group. It is a funny town. You have to have the two groups working together in order to get anything accomplished. You have to have an equal amount of people in your organization. You can't be overloaded from one to the other or nothing is accomplished.

P: Did the mayor ever talk to you, in that day? Did he ever describe things like this to you then?

K: He talked many times about the people who had control of the town. you had to have them represented on committees and so forth.

P: What group of people would that have been when he was mayor? Would that have been the industrialists and the Protestant group?

K: Basically, yes. That was the industrial group.

P: What year did that begin to shift, can you recall?

K: That probably began to shift a lot after World War II.

P: The power group was based probably in the east end?

K: Yes, because after the war, shortly after the war, and

during the 1950's, most of these industrialists sold their holdings and it was gobbled up by some of your larger industries at that time. The Stevens Mill was bought up by Republic Steel. Mahoning Valley was bought originally by General Electric I believe. The Ohio Galvanized went out of business in that period of time. Youngstown Steel Car was another that fell on hard times in the later 1950's and disintegrated.

P: Who were some of the prominent industrial families at that time?

K: The Stevens' and the Roses were prominent. The Stevens' controlled the Dollar Bank for years. The Wilders and the Waddells were active in the old Niles bank. The Wilders and the Hozacks came along and then the Klingans. The Klingans owned the Niles Firebrick and operated that. Finnies had the Niles Boiler Plate. The Wilcoxes from Youngstown ran the Youngstown Steel Car. These were mainly the industrialists.

P: Is there anything else that you would like to describe about Kistler before we close the interview?

K: No. I don't have anything further to say. I know he accomplished a lot for the city when he was a mayor and after he was mayor. I think we need more individuals like him in politics today than we have today with a little foresight and not being just for the city. If something was good for the area or that, you planned that way and didn't just get it for the city. I think too many people think that it should be for Niles like that water and many things like this, and sewage. It would probably be cheaper for us to go in with Mineral Ridge or Howland or communities and share in the cost.

P: How do you think people have regarded Harvey Kistler? Do you think history, if there has been much written about him, has been fair in regards to the Klan riot?

K: I don't think that I am in the position to give an opinion on that because I was too young at the time. The only thing is I can hear both sides of it growing up in the community. Some of the people, when they wrote his history in the state, said some things that would not be to my liking. I think he did what he had to do at the time when he was mayor to restore order. I think he did what he thought was right. He was of German background and if he thought it was right he went ahead and did it even though it might have hurt some of the people. This is the way he lived. This is the way he carried on business. It was all up front; there was nothing left unsaid. Probably a lot of people felt that he should have played favorites or did something like that. To my knowledge and my association with him, he was a straight and honest individual.

END OF INTERVIEW